

THE GREAT DECORATORS

by Mitch Owens

IN THE 91 YEARS since Elsie de Wolfe freshened her dour Victorian townhouse with muslin curtains and gallons of crisp white paint, interior design has become one of society's most important service industries. On the most basic level, a decorator is a person who takes the headaches and guesswork out of putting together a new home, who streamlines floor plans, finds the perfect sofa, matches new curtains to an old wallpaper, and hires the best upholsterer. Then there are the great decorators, dictators of the drawing room who set and maintain a community's aesthetic standards.

Today's great Texas decorators—several of them in business since the forties and some the former protégés of the state's first professional decorators—helped define regional design. They brought an international flavor to our homes. They opened shops and sold antiques as fine as those found on London's King's Road or Paris' rue Jacob. They traveled abroad and took notes, implementing what they saw into personal expressions that range as widely as the cities in which they work—from Houston's subtropical sensibilities and Dallas' Palladian ideal to the eclectic virility of Fort Worth and San Antonio's thoroughbred restraint. These twelve decorators—each one opinionated, articulate, and classically correct—create the rooms and the styles that mean Texas.

Fort Worth

MINTON-CORLEY Despite an image as Dallas' slowpoke cousin, Fort Worth often manages to surpass its neighbor in civic sophistication. Its social leaders live in houses by acclaimed architects such as David Adler, Atlee Ayres, Harwell Hamilton Harris, I. M. Pei, Paul Rudolph, and John Staub and wander through gardens by Thomas Church and Russell Page. Fort Worth has one of the finest collections of Art Deco buildings left in Texas. It also has Minton-Corley, an interior design firm opened in 1969 by Joseph Minton and David Corley. Its official statement is hybrid sensuality, often with generous wooden elements, iron-framed furniture from the pair's signature collection, and lush, boldly patterned textiles. "No matter how much color, pattern, and texture they put in a room," says Karen Muncy, the former editor of *Dallas-Fort Worth Home and Garden*, "Joe and David never play too many notes. It's rich, but easy on the eye."

Though the partners work in every mode from farmhouse provincial to contemporary, Corley, 56, says that he and Minton, 57, "try hard not to leave an identifiable stamp on anything." Their admirers, however, have spotted a number of near trademarks favored by Minton in particular—antique kilims, Palissy ware, French country antiques,

and special fabrics like hand-blocked Venetian velvets and Geoffrey Bennison's faded English linens. Corley sometimes leans in a direction best described as California Colossal, a cushiony West Coast style spearheaded by Los Angeles designers Mimi London and Michael Taylor and characterized by overstuffed white chairs and massive ceramic amphorae. Minton-Corley also has enough chutzpah to flout the rules: sheathing walls in corrugated cardboard, toning down a glaring chintz by turning it inside out, and upholstering a set of Chippendale chairs with chenille. "We don't do theme rooms," says Corley. "People want their interiors to last, so we try to stay away from trends."

Dallas

LOYD-PAXTON "We're dealers first, decorators second," says Charles Paxton Gremillion, Jr., the shorter, grayer, and more effervescent half of Loyd-Paxton, Dallas' internationally known design team. Along with partner Loyd Ray Taylor—the two met in 1959 as students at North Texas State University—Gremillion has introduced the wild West to breathtaking palatial grandeur. Karen Muncy calls Loyd-Paxton the Mario Praz of our time, rating them alongside the late Italian scholar whose 1964 study of historical furnishings and interiors revolutionized the design world's approach to the home. "They bring quality antiques to Dallas,"

Minton-Corley



Rooms by Fort Worth's Joe Minton and David Corley have two common denominators: rich textures and exotic flourishes. Minton's own living room is proof, with water-buffalo upholstery, a Bessarabian kilim, and vases from the Ming and Sung dynasties. The coffee table is a Minton-Corley design, as are the armchairs, adapted from an eighteenth-century French country original.

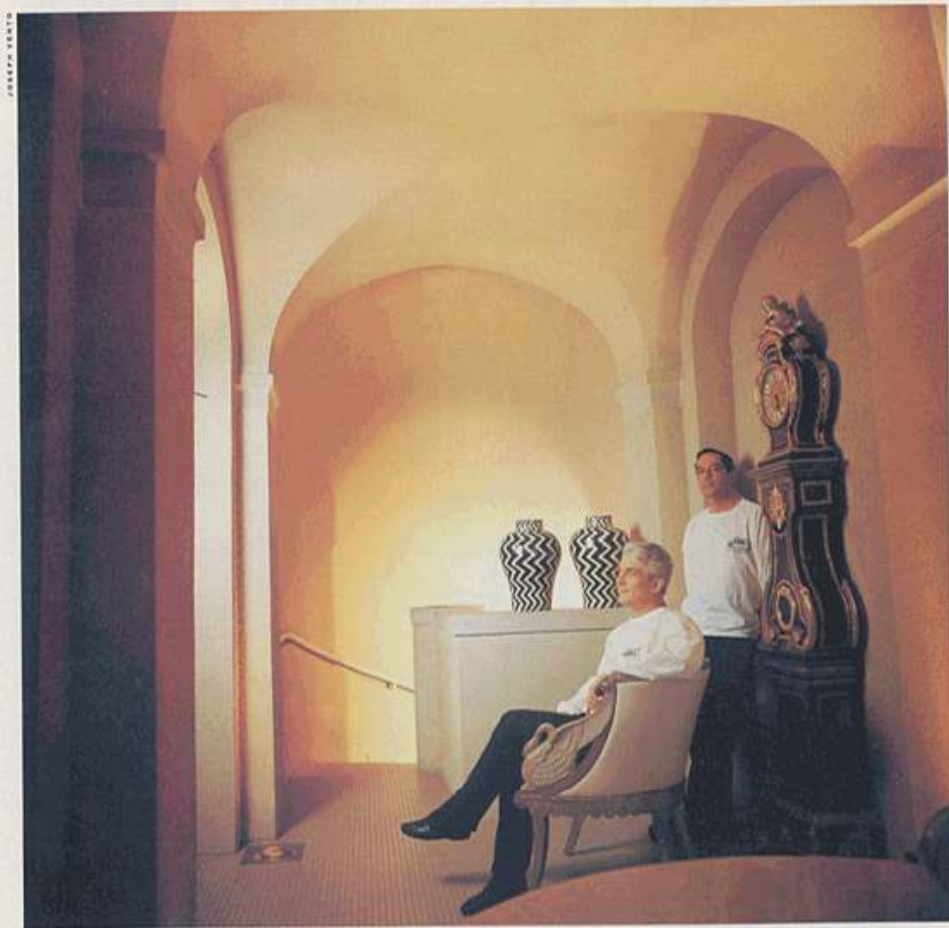
Muncy says, "and use them not only to furnish a room but to show how creativity has progressed."

Loyd-Paxton's style is restrained, fastidious, and expensive. Background colors are discreet (taupe is a favorite); windows are bare (curtains are suffocating); floors (cool marble or tile) are naked; and upholstery is Hermès leather often quietly stamped with gold. "It's the structure of the fur-

niture that's important," says Taylor. "That's where craftsmanship is displayed. Over the years reupholstery will damage the frame with nail holes. Leather lasts for centuries. And you can clean it with a sponge."

As for the furniture itself, the more dazzling its origins the better. Loyd-Paxton's clientele—mostly self-made businessmen like developer Henry S. Miller, Jr.—get to live with

Loyd-Paxton



Bold architecture, dramatic lighting, and historical furnishings characterize the fastidious Loyd-Paxton style. In the team's vaulted entrance hall, Loyd Taylor stands beside a tortoiseshell tall case clock, circa 1760. Paxton Gremillion sits in a swan-armed gondola chair designed for Empress Josephine by her husband's favorite architects, Percier and Fontaine.

the best pieces made by the finest cabinetmakers in history: chairs by Adam and Chippendale, Napoléon I's mahogany campaign bed, a steel long-case clock ordered for the Austrian imperial family, an ormolu-mounted commode emblazoned with Marie Antoinette's cipher. "Self-made men aren't frightened by our stuff," says Gremillion. "To them, it's an educational challenge."

ELIZABETH SHEA HEENAN Known as much for her impressive fees as for her formidable presence, Betty Heenan has put an investment-quality imprint on projects that include Turtle Creek condos and a playpen for a severely handicapped child. Hailed by the Highland Park establishment as not only its approved decorator but also its best friend, Heenan accepts only one or two new jobs each

Elizabeth Shea Heenan



Betty Heenan, the arbiter of blue-blood tradition, Dallas style. In her melon-colored office an Oushak rug provides a muted ground for sturdy English mahogany and a daybed once owned by Ethel Barrymore. The painted klismos chair and neo-Egyptian footstool, both French antiques, lend a note of frivolity.

year. "I don't advertise," says the Missouri-born septuagenarian. "You get the right client by word of mouth."

A self-described "designer by instinct," Heenan spent her childhood at the elbow of an aunt, Eloise Murphy, a prominent Little Rock decorator. Heenan came to Dallas in 1947 and opened her own business in 1950. Within a few years her Anglo-American repertoire began to attract a band of young matrons who still remain fervent Heenan disciples. "She gets the whole house ready," says Kathryn Amsler Priddy, the widow of Highland Park mayor Ashley Priddy. "Betty puts the knickknacks out, the books on the shelves, the magazines on the tables. And you feel like you've been there forever." Recalling such bastions of East Coast tradition as Boston's Beacon Hill and Philadelphia's Main Line, Heenan's patrician rooms are filled with old Turkish rugs, classical moldings, and Chinese export porcelains, all anchored by English and American antiques. "It's a quiet, refined atmosphere," Heenan says, "one that looks like the owners have a certain amount of culture. I've always believed that the most successful interior is a room where you don't notice anything specific. It's just a lovely space."

MARGUERITE THERESA GREEN At the beginning of her career, Maggie Green was nearly stymied by the modern movement. "The fifties was an intimidating time be-

Marguerite Theresa Green



Maggie Green, Dallas' master of color, in the blue-and-white gallery she decorated for the Jeremy Halbreichs. Inspired by the Grand Salon at Vaux-le-Vicomte—the baroque chateau built by Louis XIV's superintendent of finance—the room contains a pair of George III painted settees covered in Colefax and Fowler's Hydrangea chintz.

cause the modernists were so aggressive," says the fifth-generation Texan. "Those who survived that bondage are happy now, because Modernism was the last dogma. Now we have freedom." Proving her point, Green has built her reputation on diversity. Her portfolio ranges from the chastity of Bauhaus to Park Avenue posh, and her clients include both first-house newlyweds and social-circuit heavyweights. She is as happy using Dek Tillet's candy-colored cottons as she is an Indonesian batik or gold-glazed Fortuny. Architects praise her decorative-arts knowledge and skillful manipulation of color and form. "The only requirement I have," says Green, who once accessorized a cash-strapped politician's house out of Pier 1 Imports, "is that every project must have beauty. If it doesn't, it flunks. Taste has nothing to do with money."

An early influence was her aunt Loretta Reeves—Dallas' first successful lady decorator and a renowned antiques dealer—but Green has others, from Billy Baldwin's eclectic elegance to the country-house intimacy of England's John Fowler. Her University of Texas degree, however, is in stage design, which prepared her for dealing with domestic settings. "Stage design taught me the importance of production," explains Green, who is also an alumna of Purdue, the New York School of Interior Design, and the Frank Alvah Parsons School of Design in Paris. "You learn how to com-

Edward Perrault



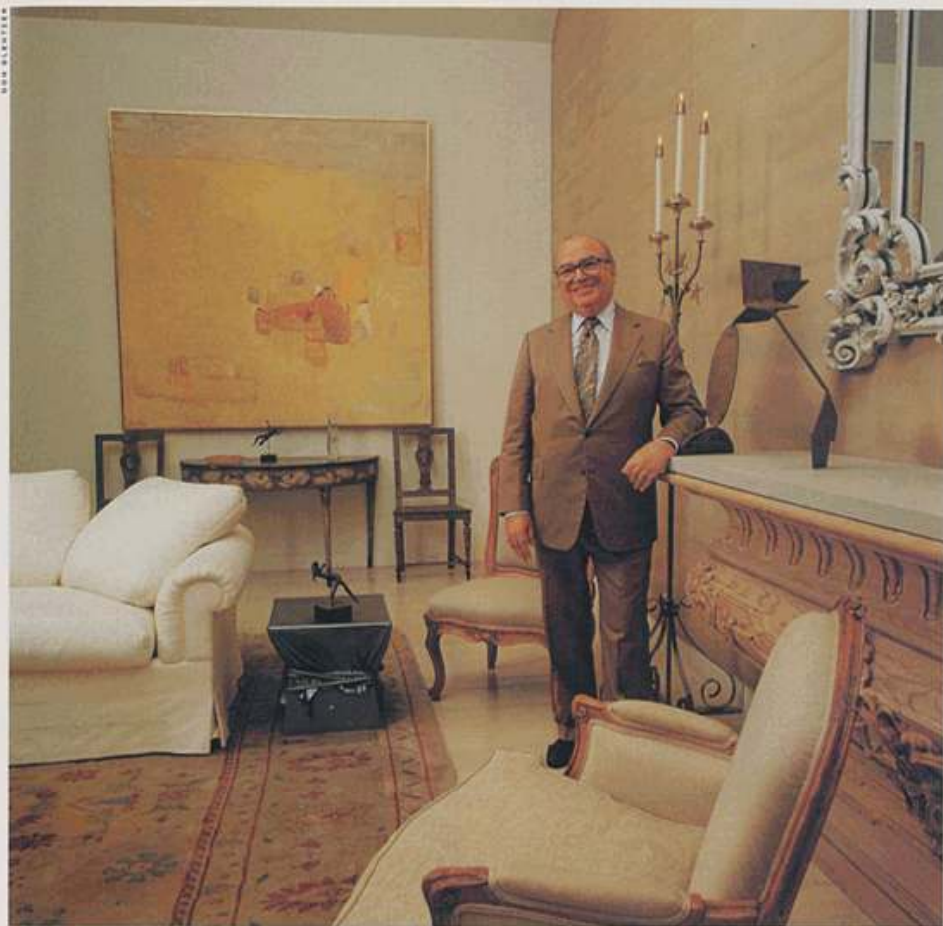
Though known for more-contemporary statements, Ed Perrault has a traditional side. In this fourteenth-floor penthouse condominium near River Oaks, Perrault created the genteel look of a French hôtel with antique tapestries and period furniture. The walls and sofa are upholstered in silks by Scalamantré; the rug is an eighteenth-century Aubusson.

Billy W. Francis



Hired to decorate Michel Halbouty's 5,200-square-foot Houston apartment, the modern-minded Billy Francis instead chose a golden-hued Francophile formality—inlaid marble floors, eighteenth-century continental furniture, and classical bronze railings. "This job," he says, "represents what I'm all about as a designer—flexibility."

Herbert Wells



Nancy and George Peterkin, Jr.'s living room is a sterling example of the climate-conscious neutrality that Houston decorator Herbert Wells brings to Texas' subtropical zone. Fabrics include heavy white silk and crisp Fortuny cotton. Beneath a painting by Pierre LeSieur are an eighteenth-century painted Venetian table and side chairs. The draped end table is molded plastic.

plete a job, how to get a complete look, the importance of lighting, and that a deadline is a deadline is a deadline. Whether you're finished or not, the curtain will go up."

Houston

EDWARD PERRAULT As a starry-eyed young actor during the thirties, Ed Perrault made the mistake of taking his song-and-dance talents and his naiveté to Depression-ravaged Broadway. "I was too young to know the economy was bad," the eighty-year-old decorator says today, "so I got hungry a few times." Reassessing his career options, the Louisiana-born Perrault—a descendant of seventeenth-century French architect Claude Perrault, who designed portions of the Louvre—returned to Houston and got a job at a fashion boutique. Eventually he became the store's vice president and general manager but resigned in 1952 to open his own firm and be a full-time interior designer.

"I don't try to be a Southwestern designer," Perrault says, "or use wrought iron or a touch of Texas in every job. I believe in style, and I've always loved a clean, contemporary look." His projects—which include the River Oaks Country Club, the first Petroleum Club, and an art-crammed jet for a Kansas millionaire—are high-wire-act combinations of English antiques and modern upholstered pieces. Mirrored walls are used to increase a room's depth or the inten-

sity of a skyline view. Another telltale Perraultism is the liberal use of oriental art: Japanese and Coromandel screens, porcelain figurines, temple roof tiles, and altar tables. "Clients often claim to hate oriental," Perrault says. "I say, 'Fine. Express yourself, but don't rule out anything until we get started.' By the end of the project, we usually end up with at least one screen."

BILLY W. FRANCIS Billy Francis has led a charmed life. An independent interior designer for only eleven years, the former Lord and Taylor gofer has become one of the American decorating community's most published talents. His jobs are featured in the pages of *Architectural Digest* and *House Beautiful*. In 1986 Francis opened his New York office; two years later he was tapped for *Interior Design's* Hall of Fame, joining such luminaries as England's David Hicks, Beverly Hills' Kalef Alaton, and New York's Sister Parish. The 45-year-old Texas native also picks up trophies from the ASID/Houston Chronicle Interior Design Awards Competition with regularity. "I win practically every year," he says.

Though he is content to operate in many aesthetic gears—one recent project, an apartment in London, is a Buattafied composition of rose-covered chintzes, swagged pelmets, and botanical prints—Francis' fame rests on a theatrical oeuvre that Houston decorator Joan Jensen calls

sophisticated and with-it. Walls upholstered in somber shades of gray or taupe provide a neutral background for abstract art, custom-designed glass-and-steel tables, and exotic accessories like eight-hundred-year-old Grecian ceramics. Biedermeier and Empire antiques are used less for their practical merits than for their sculptural presence. Structural materials are strictly deluxe: Brazilian granite,

polished chrome. "My Houston clients want a New York look," Francis says. "They're worldly and adventurous."

HERBERT WELLS Dallas architect Frank Welch thinks that a Herbert Wells room "looks like a decorator has never touched it." To New York design editor Kathryn George, Wells is "color, freshness, and light." Strong praise

Kay Davis



Kay Davis, the head decorator at Mildred English, surrounded by elements that define her upper-crust San Antonio style. On the landing is an eighteenth-century chinoiserie trunk; the Louis XVI-style chair and the Louis XV-style stool are custom-made and covered in a leopard-print linen velvet by Clarence House. Pindot carpeting by Couristan.

for an ex-window dresser who came to Texas in the fifties and made his first mark on Houston society by creating ladies' hats. "I met all the right people that way," the 65-year-old Boston native says. "More important, I learned their way of living."

The ladies who lunched soon asked the amateur milliner for decorative advice. "I stocked fabric samples for the hats,"

Wells remembers, "and one day Martha Lovett said how wonderful one of the prints would look in her bathroom. That's how I ended up with my first decorating job—bathroom curtains." At that time, Wells explains, the typical Houston house was done in a stuffy Georgian style with fine antiques against dark green walls. As an antidote to the bogus landed-gentry look, he opened a small shop, trucked

Weldon Sheffield



Weldon Sheffield, the owner of San Antonio's Taylor Company. His studio's spare ancestral air combines period antiques and modern reproductions: a new English coaching table, Georgian chairs, and a secretary handmade in Baltimore in 1910. The carpet is from Stark; the paisley wall covering is a Liberty fabric from Stroheim and Romann.

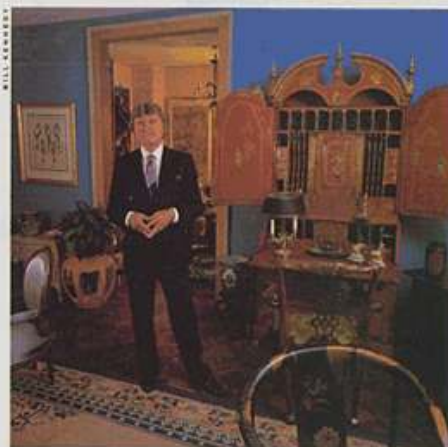
in Scandinavian furniture and accessories, and watched architect Philip Johnson walk in and place a \$1,000 order. After that, Wells's reputation was secure.

People say that Wells taught Houston how to decorate for its subtropical conditions. Jane Blaffer Owen remembers his introducing such climate-suitable elements as split-bamboo shades, straw matting, and matchstick awnings. "People had too much in their houses before Herbert came," Owen remembers. "He cleared things out and brought us practicality." In the heat of summer he likes to see winter carpets replaced with cool cotton dhurries, and for publicist Dancie Perugini Ware, Wells recently designed a washable seersucker nursery. Wells's preferred colors are soothing and informal—khaki and olive-based tones accented with bright pink or blue. "I've never attracted the River Oaks Boulevard crowd," he says. "They want the glitz. I like people to live in their houses, not just pose in them."

San Antonio

KAY DAVIS Her friends call her the dowager, and with good reason, for there are aspects of San Antonio decorator Kay Davis that recall the grandest names in her profession. Like Sister Parish, Davis has a style that is comfortable and respectably upper-crust—gilt mirrors, continental antiques, and a touch of chinoiserie. Like Elsie de Wolfe,

Orville Carr



In his Main Avenue studio Orville Carr stocks furniture and decorative objects for San Antonians who like a polished, pedigreed look. In front of the red-lacquered, Queen Anne-style secretary is a reproduction Chippendale armchair. The Chinese carpet is antique; so is the Louis XV chair. The lotus-painted horseshoe chair was bought in Hong Kong.

she is predisposed to ocelot- and leopard-print chintzes. Like Eleanor McMillen Brown, she mixes her favorite eighteenth-century French bergères and fauteuils with Georgian, Directoire, and English Regency pieces. And Davis' level of finesse has been compared to that of Billy Baldwin, one of this century's most influential tastemakers.

Davis began her career in the fifties when she moved to Corpus Christi to work for Norman Foster. Although her adventurous employer was famed for his stark combinations of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century French and Spanish furniture and Knoll's modern wares, Davis was a traditionalist. "When people wanted a strictly traditional style," says Foster, now a California sculptor, "I'd bring in Kay." In the mid-sixties Davis left Corpus Christi for the eponymous company founded by San Antonio's Mildred English. She is now its senior designer. In addition to Norman Foster—whom Davis calls her mentor—her pantheon consists of decorators whose work has stood the test of time: Billy Baldwin ("I'd look at his work on Tuesday to see what I'd be doing on Thursday"), Art Deco stylist Syrie Maugham ("She did the Duchess of Argyll's apartment in the thirties, and it still lives today"), and Elsie de Wolfe ("I bow to her genius"). And who are her clients? Socialites who appreciate the design philosophy she has brought to the old-guard enclosures of Alamo (Continued on page 52)